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Top 'contras' under scrutiny for corruption

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The leadership of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force — the main Nicaraguan rebel organization — is under scrutiny by some members of the United States Congress.

Sen. John Kerry (D) of Massachusetts, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has assigned several staff members to investigate allegations of corruption within the rebel leadership — gunrunning, drug trafficking, and participation in terrorist activity in Central America by the rebels, known as "contras." Nicaragua's ruling Sandinistas have also been accused of involvement in illegal drug trafficking.

According to congressional staff members working for Senator Kerry, several weeks of intensive investigation have revealed a large amount of information which they say could be damaging to the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) and other contra groups. These aides say they have interviewed a wide network of people — both American and Nicaraguan — who have worked with the FDN, including several former Central Intelligence Agency contract employees.

Individuals linked to the contras have also come under investigation by several government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation and US Customs Service, according to US government officials, congressional sources, and former CIA contract employees who were interviewed by the FBI.

These questions come a time when there is mounting concern among both Republican and Democratic members of Congress, some members of the Reagan administration, and influential think-tank analysts politically sympathetic to the contra cause about the integrity and basic effectiveness of much of the FDN leadership.

FDN leader Adolfo Calero strongly denies any charge of wrongdoing by his organization. Mr. Calero says that charges of gunrunning, corruption, drug involvement, and participation in terrorist activities are "absolutely false and do not have one single element of truth to them." Calero emphasizes that a recent report by the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in March of this year, based on a visit by committee staff members to FDN camps in Honduras, shows that "our [FDN] operations are perfectly well conducted."

Some of the congressional concern was made clear in several amendments the Senate tacked onto President Reagan's recent request for \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid to the contras. These amendments, in essence, called for troops to be taken out of the exclusive control of the FDN leadership and for other factions within the contra to have more influence. They also specified that US funds should not go to any groups or individuals within the FDN who are guilty of corruption, engaged in drug trafficking, or the covering up of human rights abuses. The Senate also called for the establishment of a supervisory committee to see that these and other provisions of the bill are enforced.

Distrust of the FDN leadership has been growing among liberal Democrats who consistently have opposed aid to the contras, as well as among more conservative Democrats and Republicans who support the concept of applying armed pressure on the Sandinistas.

The distrust focuses on the criticism that the FDN leadership consists of a small group of people who are tied either to followers of Nicaragua's former dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, or to members of the traditional upper classes. As such, according to congressional and think-tank analysts, the FDN fails to command the support of either a majority of Nicaraguans within the or those who form the Nicaraguan community in exile.

"It is getting increasingly difficult to find anyone in the Nicaraguan exile community, not directly working for the organization, who has a kind word to say about the FDN leadership," said one prominent Senate Republican staffer who strongly supports contra aid and who maintains close ties with the Nicaraguan exile community.

Critics of the FDN leadership, both in Congress and among the contras themselves, focus on the fact that much of the officer corps tends to spend a great deal of time outside of the fighting field and living in relative ease and comfort, while underfed contra foot soldiers lead a perilous and uncomfortable existence in the field.

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Congressional charges of corruption, according to another Republican Senate aide, reinforce this vision of much of the FDN civilian and military leadership as a small, closed group of people who are unable to mobilize Nicaraguans against the Sandinistas.

"I don't have a great deal of confidence that the current contra leadership, which the administration tends to support most avidly, is doing the job; and if they come into power, I don't think they would be a very good influence in Nicaragua. For any revolutionary group to succeed it must have the support of the people, but I don't detect that that has really happened," says Sen. Daniel Evans (R) of Washington.

One Republican senator said privately that one merely had to look closely at the amendments tacked on to the contra aid bill by Republican Sens. Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas, William Cohen of Maine, and Warren Rudman of New Hampshire to realize the unease of many of his Republican colleagues.

"What was really behind the changes proposed by Kassenbaum, Rudman, and Cohen, and passed by the Senate in the contra aid bill, was the Senate's concern about the coziness of the CIA and some of the contra leadership, and the fact that this contra leadership is not very effective."

A prominent Senate Republican aide who has long supported contra aid says that "even Jesse Helms's staff have been repeatedly telling the FDN leadership that they are concerned about the FDN's lack of effectiveness and reports of high-level corruption in its leadership." Senator Helms is the conservative Republican Senator from North Carolina who chairs the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"This is spreading beyond the Congress into the administration. People like Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, and important Republicans who have the President's ear are beginning to think that if the contras are to have a real chance for success, the FDN leadership has to be totally overhauled and [Adolfo] Calero must go," adds the staffer.

This growing lack of faith in the FDN leadership puts many congressional supporters of contra aid in a very difficult position. On the one hand, they are beginning to believe that US aid sent to the present FDN leadership would accomplish very little. On the other hand, they fear that public criticism of the FDN would be used by opponents of any sort of aid.

One congressman in this position is conservative Representative Charles Stenholm (D) of Texas, who voted for contra aid. Despite his vote, he is also very concerned about allegations of corruption in the contras.

"There is no doubt in my mind that an overwhelming majority of the members of the House want to stop communism in Nicaragua," he says. "But the question is: How do you do it? These allegations are troubling, and I think they are credible. I have spoken to the President, the vice-president, and the secretary of state about them. We were very much aware of Sandinista involvement in drugs, which has been well documented. What we did not know is that maybe the contras are doing it, too."

The congressman, when asked, stated that it was his understanding that one top FDN leader closely linked to FDN chief Calero was being investigated by the US Customs Service for charges of alleged involvement in drug trafficking.

According to a Customs Service agent, the investigation was opened in the latter part of 1985 and was conducted, at least in part, by the Houston office of the Customs Service. The agent went on to say that he lost contact with the investigation in January and did not know whether or not the investigation was still being continued. A Customs Service spokesman, Charles Conroy, stated that it was the service's written policy neither to confirm nor to deny that an investigation was taking place.

Calero, when contacted by the Monitor, strongly denied that anyone in his organization was involved in drug trafficking. "We welcome any investigation; let there be a thousand investigations, we have absolutely nothing to hide," Mr. Calero said.

Questions about contra activity have also arisen from a case being handled by a Miami public defender, John Mattes. Mr. Mattes works for the US Public Defender's office.

Mattes's interest in the contra situation arose from his defense of a Cuban-American Dade County corrections officer. The officer, Jesús García, allegedly worked with the contras. Mr. García was arrested in Miami in August 1985, according to Mattes, for attempting to sell a machine gun illegally within the US to an undercover US government agent. García was convicted and is in federal prison in Miami. Mattes is appealing the case.

Mattes told the Monitor that he began looking at contra activities in preparing García's defense. Mattes began investigating the activities of various contra organizations, and individuals linked to them in Miami and Central America. These investigations led him to believe that at least some low- and mid-level contra members had been involved in plotting terrorist activities in Central America.

Specifically, Mattes says, FDN trainers in the US and Central America have told him of a plot to blow up the US Embassy in the Costa Rican capital, San José. The point of this alleged plan, according to Mattes, might have been to blame the action on the Sandinistas and create an atmosphere in which a US invasion of Nicaragua was more likely.

Mattes also said that in his interviews he discovered "convincing allegations" of contra gunrunning and drug trafficking.

"A number of very serious allegations have surfaced which suggests that those involved in the contra movement have engaged in a wide range of criminal activities in the US and in the region," Senator Kerry told the Monitor. "The very serious nature of these allegations strongly suggests the need for a detailed and complete congressional inquiry."